

4 Sustainability

Text

Social change in the future

Population and change

Changes in population size, distribution, and composition affect the culture and social structure of a society and change the relationships among nations. The countries experiencing the most rapid increases in population have a less-developed infrastructure to deal with those changes. How will nations of the world deal with population growth as the global population continues to grow? Only time will provide a response to this question.

In the United States, a shift in population distribution from central cities to suburban areas and commuter towns has produced other dramatic changes. Central cities have experienced a shrinking tax base, as middle-income and upper-income residents and businesses have moved to suburban and outlying areas. As a result, schools and public services have declined in many areas, leaving those people with the greatest needs with the fewest public resources and essential services. The changing composition of the US population has resulted in children from more diverse cultural backgrounds entering school, producing a demand for new programs and changes in curricula. An increase in the birth rate has created a need for more child care; an increase in the older population has created a need for services such as medical care, placing greater demands on programs such as Social Security.

Population growth and the movement of people to urban areas have brought profound changes to many regions and intensified existing social problems. Among other factors, growth in population is one of the most significant driving forces behind environmental concerns, such as the availability and use of natural resources.

Technology and change

Technology is an important force for change; in some ways, technological development has made our lives much easier. Advances in communication and transportation have made instantaneous worldwide communication possible, but have also brought old belief systems and the status quo into question as never before. Today, we are increasingly moving information instead of people—and doing it almost instantly. Advances in science and medicine have made significant changes in people's lives in high-income countries.

Scientific advances will continue to affect our lives, from the foods we eat to our reproductive capabilities. Genetically engineered plants have been developed and marketed in recent years, and biochemists are creating potatoes, rice, and cassava with the same protein value as meat (Petersen, 1994). Advances in medicine have made it possible for those formerly unable to have children to procreate; women well beyond menopause are now able to become pregnant with the assistance of medical technology. Advances in medicine have also increased the human lifespan, especially for white and middle- or upper-class individuals in high-income nations; medical advances have also contributed to the declining death rate in low-income nations, where birth rates have not yet been curbed.

Just as technology has brought about improvements in the quality and length of life for many, it has also created the potential for new disasters, ranging from

global warfare to localized technological disasters at toxic waste sites. As the sociologist William Ogburn (1966) suggested, when a change in the material culture occurs in society, a period of cultural lag follows in which the non-material (ideological) culture has not yet caught up with material development. The rate of technological advance at the level of material culture today is mind-boggling. Many of us can never hope to understand technological advances in the areas of artificial intelligence, holography, virtual reality, biotechnology, cold fusion, and robotics.

One of the ironies of 21st-century high technology is the increased vulnerability that results from the increasing complexity of such systems. As futurist John L. Petersen (1994:70) notes, “The more complex a system becomes, the more likely the chance of system failure. There are unknown secondary effects and particularly vulnerable nodes.” He also asserts that most of the world’s population will not participate in the technological revolution that is occurring in high-income nations.

Social institutions and change

Many changes occurred in the family, religion, education, the economy, and the political system during the 20th century and early in the 21st century. The size and composition of families in the United States changed with the dramatic increase in the number of single-person and single-parent households. Changes in families produced changes in the socialization of children, many of whom spend large amounts of time in front of a television set or in child-care facilities outside their own homes. Although some political and religious leaders advocate a return to “traditional” family life, numerous scholars argue that such families never worked quite as well as some might wish to believe.

Public education changed dramatically in the United States during the 20th century. This country was one of the first to provide “universal” education for students regardless of their ability to pay. As a result, at least until recently, the United States has had one of the most highly educated populations in the world. Today, the United States still has one of the best public education systems in the world for the top 15 per cent of the students, but it badly fails the bottom 25 per cent. As the nature of the economy changes, schools almost inevitably will have to change, if for no other reason than demands from leaders in business and industry for an educated workforce that allows US companies to compete in a global economic environment.

A new concept of world security is emerging, requiring the co-operation of high-income countries in halting the proliferation of arms and terrorism. That concept also requires the co-operation of all nations in reducing the plight of the poorest people in the low-income countries of the world.

Although we have examined changes in population, technology, and the social institutions separately, they all operate together in a complex relationship, sometimes producing large, unanticipated consequences. As we move further into the 21st century, we need new ways of conceptualizing social life at both the macro level and micro level. The sociological imagination helps us think about how personal troubles—regardless of our race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, or physical abilities and disabilities—are intertwined with the public issues of our society and the global community of which we are part. As one analyst noted regarding Lois Gibbs and Love Canal, if Love Canal has taught Lois Gibbs—and the rest of us—anything, it is that ordinary people become very smart very quickly when their lives are threatened. They become adept at detecting absurdity, even when it is concealed in bureaucratese and scientific jargon. Lois Gibbs learned that one cannot always rely on government to act in the best interests of ordinary citizens—at least, not without considerable prodding. She determined that she would prod them until her objectives were attained. She led one of the most successful, single-purpose grass-roots efforts of our time (Levine, 1982:xv).

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